Building Hopeful Futures – a unique collaboration of four Aruban UNESCO schools 1-3

Loek Schoenmakers, Ph.d.; Nora Eleonora

In March 2023 a unique project started, funded by UNESCO, to strengthen the participation of the four UNESCOs chools at the island Aruba. Based on social constructionist thought the four schools collaborated to make not only plans for their future cooperation, but also to build strong relationships between teachers, students and parents. We have written a serie of 3 short articles.

In the 1. article we will describe the foundation of the projects and some practical ideas, to put social construction in to action. In the 2. article we will go more in depth to talk about our experiences, based on social construction to build strong Vision within the schools, to improve the sustainability for change and future actions. In the 3. Article we will go more in depth how we have worked to establish an increasing parental involvent, in the Unesco communities of the 4 schools. I may be clear that we ground our transformative change work on social constructionis theory not to confuse by social constrictivism.

In this 1.-3 article we describe the foundational thought based on social construction to establish transformative change processes which may be inspirational for others within the UNESCO ASP network. See for selected resources for further reading.

Context

Within the UNESCO Participation Project at the island ARUBA, which took place januari 2023, the school staff of Princes Amalia, EduCampus, The International School of Aruba (ISA) and Colegio Hillario Angela, co-created many ideas for keeping the strong colllaboration powerful for the coming years.

Based on the ideas of social construction, all staff members of the 4 schools were invited to think about Future plans. This thinking together – the meaning making *proces* - resulted in many creative ideas. *This proces of collective meaning making* is very important. By doing so, we transformed the

human (individual capital) of each staf member into social capital – the mutual strength or potential of the four schools.

Social constructions seems to give a strong foundation for establishing sustainable ánd transformative processes.

Social construction, what are we talking about?

Constructionist theory and practice locates the source of meaning, value and action in the relational connection among people.
It is through relational processes that we create the world in which we most want to live and work.
Social constructionist dialogue – of cutting edge significance within the social sciences and humanities – concerns the processes by which humans generate meaning together.
The focus is on how social groups and the relational practices within those groups create and sustain beliefs in the real, the rational, and the good.
We recognize that as people create meaning together, so do they sow the seeds of action.
Meaning and action are entwined.
As we generate meaning together we create the future.[1]

Social constructionism can be seen as a movement in the social sciences[2], a theoretical orientation[3] that focuses on human making sense of and giving meaning to their environments. It characterises the creation of meaning through dialogue and collaborative activities [4]. It emphasises the importance of coming together to create shared images without sacrificing the individual's individuality. Social processes - the relational dimension - play a prominent role. Hosking and McNamee[5] stress that social constructionism should not be seen as a methodology or particular techniques, but rather as an orientation or way of thinking or even a way of being - a way of engaging with the world that centres dialogue and multiplicity - an orientation that gives new meaning and value to "ongoing and open dialogues". Social constructionism, they say, is both a theory about theories and also an orientation towards social practices and what these social practices sustain, produce and change. There is no single definition of what social constructionism is.[6]

Social constructionism, which continued to develop within the social sciences from the 1950s onwards, assumes that people each have their own worldview. The central thesis of social constructionism is that an objective (social) reality does not exist, but is constructed by the people who are part of it. This makes humans subject and object in their own reality. This has important implications for what the organisation is as a system and how it can be changed. It has important implications for research

"Characteristic of the social constructionist perspective then is that these signifiers do not develop "within" the individual (the hermit hypothesis), but in the interactions between individuals. The basis of the meaning-making process is experiencing events in the organisation or within research (e.g.: the announcement of a formal change process), discovering or summarising patterns (in interaction with others) and giving meaning to these patterns. The "objective reality" thus does not exist; in their mutual interaction, people develop reality-constructions that one experiences locally and in that interaction there as "true".[7]

Six assumptions are crucial

It is through relational processes that we constantly create a world in which we (want to) work, learn and live.
Whatever I call it or characterise it, it is not determined by the object itself (the bottle) but will grow out of a set of relationships I am involved in, a community I am part of, traditions that are there.[8]

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[1] www.taosinsititute.net
[2] Gergen, 2017
[3] Burr, 2007
[4] Gergen & Gergen, 2004
[5] Hosking and McNamee, 2006
[6] Gergen, 2015, Burr, 2007
[7] Hosking and McNamee, 2006, p 23
[8] Gergen, Youtube, 2010

Nothing is real until people agree on it

Meanings we give to reality come from our relationships. In the interactions between people[9]. The value they have/get is determined by their usefulness. We live in a world of meaning-making. We understand and value this reality and ourselves based on our personal history and shared culture.

Meanings are historically and culturally bound

Knowledge of reality is historical, socio-culturally specific and context determined.The way we normally understand reality, the categories and concepts we use are historically and culturally bound. Where and with whom we are or live, and when that took place or takes place, determines meaning-making.

(Inter)Action is directly linked to these signifiers

We (inter)act primarily on the basis of what we consider to be reality, rational, plausible and good. Without these signifiers, very little would be worth doing anything. Traditions or agreements once made, certain ways of thinking, determine and maintain the meaning we give. "Something" acquires meaning only when we agree on it together. From that meaning, we work on and arrive at actions based on that meaning we give in our social groups. Joint action, going on together, that is where shared versions of knowledge are constructed or made through interactions.

Knowledge and social action go hand in hand

From meaning, actions arise: people's actions. That action is determined by that knowledge, and sustained by it. New knowledge arising from social actions can in turn lead to different or new actions. So they influence each other.

Words make worlds

Through language, we express reality and can use (new) language to make a future: words make reality. Language is a form of social action. What is interesting is the idea that language is not only seen as a means of re-presenting reality, but adds that language can also make reality. Language thus acquires meaning not only from what something is, but rather from what we make of it. The meaning of words comes from what Wittgenstein calls language games. Daring to step away from traditions opens up new possibilities.

Language can be seen as social action because people use language expressions within their social contacts that have practical consequences for action as well as connecting them at the same time. So social constructionism is very curious about language

The future is to be created by us - together

We construct the world.[10] New meanings of reality are possible. We are not possessed and are not bound to the past. We could banish or dissolve non-working or dysfunctional ways of living, and together create new alternatives. Sustaining what is of value, or creating new futures, requires participation within our relationships. When we damage or destroy relationships, we lose the capacity to maintain/sustain ways of living and to create new futures. When worlds of meaning meet, creative outcomes can emerge. New forms of being in relationship, new realities, and new possibilities can all emerge. When worlds of meaning-making are in conflict with each other, this could lead to separation and aggression, thus undermining relationships

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[9] Burr, 2007
[10] Gergen and Gergen, 2004

and their creative potential. Through creative care of relationships, perhaps destruction and conflict can be reduced or transformed. (Gergen, 2014)

Implications for transformative change processes- implications for our project

Choosing social construction as basement for our change processes helps to make the proces transformative. Too often we put lots of efforts in change processes, which not always lead to transformative change. As described in *Happily Different*[11], a reconstruction of a huge transformative educational change proces in Suriname, South America, four elements (ABCD) seems to be crucial for feeding this transformative change process. In our project we used these four elements as constant guiding principles.

It may be clear that when we focus on relational processes, as social constructionism does, we need to centralise people and their ongoing interactions in the change processes. This pleas for an relational orientation in stead of a individualistic orientation. It is exactly this relational focus which opens many opportunities to make the process transformative.

Centralising on people an establishing strong change processes urges us to use voice and influence of all-in the process. When people are valued, seen and heard they will be more motivated to collaborate in the process and make wished futures reality. It is this where we – in our project – are building hopeful futures together! The interesting thing is that while focusing on the relational. People will connect, will be more open to differences and from this strong relationships are build which make the proces more sustainable.

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Appreciation
working from the appreciative stance

Building bridges
connecting with the other and the otherness, connecting with reality

Collaborative relating
working together based on the collaborative stance

Dialogical practices **talking together based on the dialogical stance**

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From the findings of the reserach process Happily Different four elements were detected:

A Appreciation

Using the ideas of Appreciative Inquiry, which are built on social constructionist thought, is crucial as a red thread. Emphasizing possibilities and positive values generates powerful, transfromative energy. Within this change process it means that the problem language shifts towards possibility language. Centering these language practices in what people do together in certain situations has significant meaning for what they construct. In *the I Believe In You! process*[12] it meant that language practices were slowly changing into practices in which people started to talk about hope, possibilities,chances,strengths, enthusiasm, happiness - a reality of possibility was constructed. By working from the AI thought the process became an inclusive one for all, one which engaged all parties in co-constructing the wished for, positive future.

B Building Bridges

From the appreciative stance, seeing differences as possibilities rather than problems helps us to build bridges, to connect with the other(s). In doing so, one of the by-products is a sense of future which is not experienced as threatening. Building bridges must be seen as a verb; we need to be constantly active in building and maintaining these bridges. Too often people think that this happens automatically. Maintenance often happens too late when these bridges collapse and we are asked as consultants or advisors to fix them. But based on social construction we can centralise these relational processes in our projects.

[11] Schoenmakers, L. 2014
[12] Schoenmakers, L. 2014

C Collaborative Relating

Change processes occur in many situations where people are doing things together. These performances require the *relational other*. *How* we do things together determines highly the impact of what we will achieve. Collaborative practices have this extra dimension when we approach them from the relational view. Here,[13] collaboration is seen as a life style and seen as a deliberate and purposeful way of relating which is simultaneously flexible and responsive to others. Again, it is the appreciative stance which invites others to contribute and participate in their own ways, without judging who should contribute what and to what level. Andersen (2008) speaks in her work about the collaborative relationships in which we connect, collaborate and construct with each other.

D Dialogical Practices

Communication, and therefore dialogical practices as a way of communicating, has been another important feature in generating sustainable, transformative change. Communication can be seen as a way of people doing something together.[14] Like the collaborative practices, dialogical practices have many forms. By influencing each other we generate new meaning or knowledge. This is exactly where I think dialogical practices showed their strengths in the change process. Co-creating of meaning and co-constructing of new understandings, co-creating of common sense, and where the constructionist literature speaks of co-creating something new, which we call transformation.

Back to practical implications in our project: what did we do?

There is a lot to say about social construction, for further reading we refer to the selected resources at the end of this article. In our project we used social construction as starting point for our activities. In this article we will briefly set out some of these activities with some helpful tips.

Tip 1 Inviting all community members

One of the goals was to empower the collaboration of the four schools. When we want to build a sustainable future, using UNESCOs mission and vision, we need to invite all people of the community to talk about this future. So from the start it is important to:

- *Dialogue with a variation of members about the subject of change.*
  This increases from the start that we are working at meaningful issues which can improve the working, learning an living context of in this case the four schools communities.

- *Be open for the unexpected.* In stead of a fixed, detailed plan, we wereholding our approach lightly. Still we wanted to find ideas for building the future together, using what we prepared, but... it is so

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[13] London, St George & Wulf, 2009, p. 1
[14] McNamee, 2008a

crucial to get loose of planned and prepared activities in the moment, when suddenly new ideas appear. Improvisation is important.

- *Using a solution and future oriented language*. As explained Words make Worlds or reality. So being aware of the use of language as transformative mean,is important. So we were open for problems, or limitations, but from this we put most time and focus an sulution, chances and opportunities.

- *Inviting participants as change agents.*

During the process and weeks we were open for feedback, idead, improvements of all involved. By doing so the proces becomes strong, because people feel seen and heard, and experiences thier voice is valued.

Golden circle, Sinek
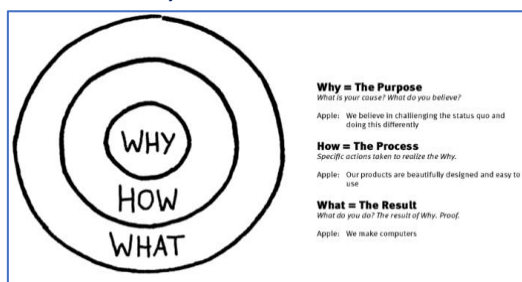
We used the idea of **the Golden circle** as a structure. Sinek emphasizes in his work that we need to talk about the Why? In stead of starting with the How and What in change processes. The challenge in our projects was to invite as much voices as possible to talk about the Why and the future collaboration. We used **the World Café** as a collaborative activity. All members, almost 90 people, of the schools were invited for a central meeting. After some "getting to know eachother activities", energizers, we started the worldcafé in 3 rounds, while all the participants were divided and mixed in small group tables. After a brief introduction of the purpose of the excerzise three questions were discussed:

1 Why do we want to collaborate in future?
2 How can we collaborate at th ebest in future?
3 What activities can we collaborate on?

In three rounds of each 20 minutes they collaborated and dialogued about the questions. After 20 minutes they changed tables and discussed further about the next question, using previous notes of the previous group.

In the end there was a plenary closing using ther technique of Walking Gallery. All the lipovers were presented at walls as a gallery, participants walked around and a new dialogue and mutual meaning process started.

A small group was selected at th end to co create one Why, How and What for building the future. We agreed that in the coming months each school team would discuss this concept, in the end there was one final document which will be used as guideline for building the whised hopefull future.

Tip 2 Select collaborative activities, embracing diversity

As written it is important to invest IN the proces in establishing *strong relationships*. We carefully selected collaborative activities for getting to know each other, and to invite as many people to talk and exchange their thoughts and ideas. Using polyvocality is an important aspects of social constructionist thought. In hese current times it seems that people are not always used anymore tob e open and curious for the other voice. We invited participants to be constantly aware about their own assumptions, fixed mindsets and the taken for granted ideas and invited them tot hink and speak out of the box and embrace every expecience, idea or answer in appreciative ways.

Tip 3 Document results, activities, making participants responsable

The aim of the project was to create new ideas, visions of the wished future in working together as a strong force. One of the challenges was to keep data so that they could be used for creating mutual understood documents. So we worked with video, post-its, pictures and work sessions to create these documents. Important is to make

people themselves responsible. So we invited participants to take responsible and write these texts themselves, share the concept documents in little groups- and team meetings for improvement.

Because we used social construction and the idea of building trustful relationships based on their own local needs and ideas, it was easy to make people responsible for these tekst, they were highly motivated.

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More ideas how to invite diversity and strive for incusivbity in the change proces…
go to
https://www.liberatingstructures.com/

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Results of this project

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Result of the Why?

To make our students good citizens!

In the end we collaborate, share knowledge, connect and create *togetherness* as one family, to support our students in their learning and life experiences. To create life long learners. Our students are the Future. We are supporting our students to be the best future. Our students become change makers, Change agents. Making them great citizens of the world!

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In this project we worked both at proces and content level. Teaching participants the understanding of Social Construction and the basic assumptions, and from this experiences this in establishing relational processes helped to be fruitful in the end.

The whole proces resulted in a shared vision, based on the golden circle of Sinek, in which we co created a shared vwison of future collaboration the Why?), the strategies to be used (the How?) And the realisation ot this al in activities (the What?). Besides this the appreciative process generated lots of energy and positive commitment to make this co-created and wishful future to become true. The most important issue from know is to feed these processes by using Appreciation, Building bridges, Collaborative relating an dialoging practices to feed these processes, make then sustainable and transformative at the same time. We hope that this article has given some inspiration about social construction as foundation for transformative change processes. Simply by re-humanising these processes and centralising relational processes. In the next article we will describe our process of building Vision Together.

Selected resources

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